

# Introduction

*When the number of initiatives increases, while time, resources and emotional energy are constant, then each new initiative . . . will receive fewer minutes, dollars and ounces of emotional energy than its predecessors.*

Doug Reeves

*The real path to greatness, it turns out, requires simplicity and diligence. It requires clarity, not instant illumination. It demands each of us to focus on what is vital—and to eliminate all of the extraneous distractions.*

Jim Collins

*Hedgehogs see what is essential and ignore the rest.*

Jim Collins

**T**he argument of this book is simple: If we choose to take just a few well-known, straightforward actions, in every subject area, we can make swift, dramatic improvements in schools. Some believe we could virtually eliminate the achievement gap within a few years. An Australian study indicated it would take seven years (Garnaut, 2007); another study estimates about five years (Kane & Hanushek in Haycock, 2005).

But the price for such swift improvement is steep: Most schools would have to stop doing almost everything they now do in the name of school improvement. Instead, they would have to focus only on implementing “what is essential.” Hardest of all, they would have to “ignore the rest” (Collins, 2001, p. 91)—the fads, programs, and innovations that now prevent us from ensuring that every student in every school receives a quality education.

Why such draconian action? Because the only reason our schools haven’t made astonishing progress in the last 30 years of “reform” is quite simple: very few schools ever implemented “what is essential”—the most powerful, simple actions and structures that would dramatically increase the proportion of students prepared for college or careers.

What is “essential” for schools? Three simple things: reasonably coherent curriculum (*what we teach*); sound lessons (*how we teach*); and far more purposeful reading and writing in every discipline, or *authentic literacy* (integral to both *what* and *how we teach*). But as numerous studies demonstrate, these three essential elements are only rarely implemented; every credible study confirms that they are still pushed aside by various initiatives, every year, in the majority of schools (Schnoker, 2006).

The status quo has to change. We insult and frustrate our teachers and leaders when we keep asking them to adopt complex, confusing new initiatives and programs that can’t possibly succeed in the absence of decent curriculum, lessons, and literacy activities. These constitute the indisputable—if age-old—core of effective practice, and of education itself.

In the last few years, I have found that educators yearn to be told something like this:

There will be no more initiatives—at least for a time. Instead, we will focus *only* on what will have an immediate and dramatic impact on learning in your classrooms: ensuring the

implementation of a common, content-rich curriculum; good lessons; and plenty of meaningful literacy activities (such as close reading, writing, and discussion) across the curriculum. Moreover, we will not expect you to implement these elements until we have fully clarified that these three elements will—indisputably—have more impact on your students’ success than all other initiatives combined.

If we understand and embrace the concept of simplicity, which starts with a recognition that “less is more,” then our schools will achieve what previous generations never thought possible. Best of all, none of the essential elements must be implemented perfectly to have their intended effect. Throughout this book, I’ll be citing ordi-